
Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

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At first glance there is a fairly obvious criticism that one might wish to make about Paul Loeb's *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*. Loeb asserts that his aim is to "make significant new progress in solving the riddles of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by offering a new understanding of Nietzsche's well-known clue that the thought of eternal recurrence is its fundamental conception" (1). This desire to solve riddles—a desire which drives Loeb's study from beginning to end—will strike some readers of Nietzsche as fundamentally misguided. Surely Nietzsche is the thinker who counsels against such interpretive closure: "A thing explained is a thing we have no further concern with" (BGE §80). Is Loeb's text an example of the thanatropic urge that Nietzsche discerns behind the philosophical desire to eradicate ambiguity? Is *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* precisely this—the decisive suppression of the free flow of creative readings, the slow strangulation of Zarathustra's very pulse?

To those who might take such a view it must be acknowledged that there can be few readers of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* who have not been tempted to solve the cryptic codes seemingly embedded in the text. Indeed, Zarathustra solicits his readers to ponder the meaning of his 'vision' and 'riddle' in Part Three of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and even goes so far as to offer some answers of a kind. As Loeb notes, Nietzsche actively invites the attempt to interpret this enigmatic text as an elaboration of the notion of eternal return when he identifies it as the 'fundamental conception' of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo*. Nevertheless, as Nietzsche commentators know to their cost, this task is impeded by the fact that there is scant reference to

the thought of eternal return in this ‘master work,’ a problem exacerbated by Zarathustra’s seeming failure to ‘teach’ the doctrine. The scattered allusions to the thought do not amount to a comprehensive explication of the idea and the very nature and substance of the work remain an enduring mystery.

To meet this challenge Loeb’s strategy is to focus on the ‘narrative aspects’ of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* rather than its ‘doctrinal aspects’ (2). His guiding idea is that the narrative embodies and enacts this thought, the implication being that a reader seeking insight into the perplexing idea of eternal return should look beyond the handful of passages which explicitly mention this teaching. This is a refreshing and inspired approach to Nietzsche’s text and one which promises to yield innovative and exciting interpretations. Whilst it is not certain that for Loeb the narrative elements always do take precedence over the doctrinal, in the course of his long disquisition he is tireless in his attempt to supply a textually plausible account for perceived puzzles and anomalies. This produces a very singular kind of text, worthy of our careful scrutiny.

In what follows I would like to briefly address three issues: Loeb’s attempt to render the enigmatic thought of eternal return coherent in the context of the narrative unity of a life; the role played by death (and its relation to time), and Loeb’s relation to existing scholarly approaches to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Loeb’s initial assumptions about *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are as follows:

Since this [the thought of eternal recurrence] is a thought about time, and since *Zarathustra* narrates the life of the fictional Zarathustra, the book’s relevant narrative aspects must therefore concern the chronology of events in Zarathustra’s life. (2)

Whilst some readers might hesitate to designate the thought of eternal return as a thought ‘about time’ as such (perhaps it is equally a thought about ‘life’ and ‘identity’ if indeed it is a thought ‘about’ anything in this way) it is the issue of the “chronology of events in Zarathustra’s life” which promises to prove most problematic. Loeb seeks to reconcile a novelistic notion of chronology with a philosophical thinking of eternal recurrence which generates a tension so taut that the interpretive thread threatens to snap at any moment. Yet it is a testament to what Loeb has done here that this never happens. Much hinges in this work on accepting the idea that we are presented with a more extensive ‘life story’ of Zarathustra than it might initially seem. Loeb regards Nietzsche’s text as structured by a unified plot in which events from Zarathustra’s most distant childhood to his final breath are endlessly repeated, albeit with an ‘awareness’ that only emerges in a ‘redemptive moment.’

In the first chapter of his book, Loeb addresses the well-known ‘refutation’ of Nietzsche’s thought of eternal recurrence by Georg Simmel in 1907 that “there can never be any human awareness of recurrence that could count as evidence in support of the objective truth of Nietzsche’s doctrine” (13). This follows from the incompatibility between memory of a previous existence and the demand for qualitative identity of repetitions. Without such awareness recurrence would be qualitatively indiscernible (and hence lacking any evidential force or experiential impetus) but the addition of awareness to a cycle of recurrence seemingly introduces an impermissible deviation from strict qualitative identity. Loeb points out that such objections to Nietzsche’s thought of eternal recurrence tend to assume that there is an *original* life that is being repeated. To believe this is to persist in thinking according to a Platonist model of being (and to assume a position ‘outside’ of time from which to verify qualitative identity). However, Loeb draws the reader’s attention to the point that eternal recurrence of one’s life entails the

eternal recurrence of the awareness that one has lived before, an awareness that is triggered “as soon as I hear the demon’s message” (15). Loeb’s thinking here may appear to have something of the character of Klossowski’s meditations on anamnesis and forgetting in the experience of eternal return but on closer inspection its philosophical orientation is markedly different. Whilst on Klossowski’s reading the demon’s prophecy marks the collapse of self-identity within time—indeed it shatters the principle of identity as such—Loeb’s reading maintains a self-identical subject, the decisive factor being that this subject is on the brink of death at the moment the revelation of recurrence is made.

The role that death plays in Loeb’s analysis is of particular interest, not least because his attempt to discern its presence in key textual moments involves feats of interpretation which are often strenuous. Loeb notes that Nietzsche primes his readers for Zarathustra’s death from the outset of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Not only does the text begin with Zarathustra’s ‘downgoing,’ its fundamentally *tragic* conception would lead us to expect the sacrifice of the ‘highest type.’ Yet at the end of Part III of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the ‘protagonist’ Zarathustra does not die or so it would seem. Rising to the challenge of arguing otherwise, Loeb offers an intriguing and controversial understanding of Nietzsche’s text which recasts *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a coherent narrative of eternally recurring death and rebirth, culminating with Zarathustra’s ‘death’ at the close of the third part. Loeb makes the bold and audacious suggestion that Part IV be regarded as an analeptic satyr play which would position it as chronologically prior to the events at the end of Part III although later structurally. The idea is certainly a thought-provoking one and entirely in keeping with Nietzsche’s interest in developing a Zarathustra ‘drama’ (styled on the death of Empedocles) after completing his magnum opus. As many scholars will know, the plans for the drama do include the postponed ‘death’ of Zarathustra but it remains more

debatable whether the death of Zarathustra ever occurs in the published work. To develop his argument, then, Loeb returns to two passages that have been much discussed in the context of the eternal return, section 341 of *The Gay Science* and ‘The Vision and the Riddle’ section in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, to invite us to reread them in the light of a rethinking of the moment of death.

Loeb draws on a range of potential ‘clues’ to support his claim that “the moment of the demon’s revelation is supposed to be the last moment in the interlocutor’s life ...” (35). The suggestion that GS 341 is “about death and dying words” (33) is boldly argued but even the most generous reader would have to concede that the supporting evidence is lacking. Consequently, one is prompted to ask why it is so important to Loeb to argue this point. What *value* accrues to the notion of death in this text? No answer to this question is immediately forthcoming but Loeb’s careful reading of Socrates’s hour of death in GS 340 offers an essential clue. Socrates’s claim to owe a cock to Asclepius could certainly be seen as the life-negating view that constitutes the ‘teeth-gnashing response’ to the eternal recurrence of life in GS 341. Here the moment of death is determined as a moment of *judgment* on life as a whole, a notion which pervades our Judaeo-Christian inheritance and concomitant ideas about mortality. It is not obvious, of course, that such a ‘deathbed revelation’ is in place in GS 341 or in Nietzsche’s thinking of eternal recurrence more generally. However, Loeb invites us to see the demon’s prophecy in GS 341 in precisely this way. Similarly, he argues that ‘Zarathustra’s gateway is also a symbol for the threshold of death’ (60) and he attempts to argue that Zarathustra’s last question to the dwarf—“must we eternally come again?”—is asked “just as he was stepping from inside the gateway and onto the lane extending out ahead.” In fairness, there is no real textual evidence for this assumption either but Loeb takes pains to assert that “the gateway *Augenblick*” functions as a “symbol for the presently experienced moment of death” (65).

It might be argued that Loeb looks to the moment of death to mark the fulfillment of a life, indeed that death is the ultimate horizon in which one affirms one's existence. It would seem that it is Zarathustra's relation to death which is truly individuating for it is only with death that he is able to grasp his eternally recurring existence as a whole. If this is a fair interpretation of Loeb's text, what it rules out is a more fundamentally anti-humanist perspective. Rather than seeing Zarathustra's death as a return to the undifferentiated terrain of pre-personal matter, as the experience of dissolution, or as the horror which brings forth a divine ecstasy, Loeb claims that "the dying Zarathustra is in a position to prophetically observe his own process of coming to life again" (66). What is this death which is so effortlessly experienced? Here – as elsewhere in his text – Loeb presents Zarathustra's 'death' as life once more. There is no loss of self, no exposure to the anonymity of a world devoid of action and meaning. Something of the old 'soul superstition' seems to haunt this argument. Perhaps much depends on how we are to read Zarathustra's 'conversing with his soul' at the close of 'The Convalescent' and how we are to understand its 'redemption': "Where would future and past be closer than in you?" (TSZ, III,14).

The difficulty in asserting Zarathustra's eternally recurring death and rebirth in these threshold moments lies in a tension which Loeb never satisfactorily resolves between a cyclical model of time in which the eternal recurrence of Zarathustra is implicated and the tremendous 'moment' within which the immanent re-coming of time is cast. Loeb interprets 'The Vision and the Riddle' to reveal eternal recurrence as "a doctrine about closed circular time, and about the implication of this kind of time for human life and meaning" (57). In this context, it is suggested that, "Nietzsche is here presupposing a relational conception of time according to which temporal moments do not exist independently of the things with which they are associated" (58).

What this does not allow is a thinking of the moment as the wellspring of 'time.' Indeed, Loeb's analysis risks confusing the conditions of possibility and their products:

Because the associated moments in time are themselves entangled in the recurring knot of causes, Zarathustra's recreation cannot take place until time itself has recurred and returned to exactly the same moment in which he was created. (67)

There is clearly a problem with positioning Nietzsche's thought of perpetual regeneration of becoming within an understanding of 'time itself.' Time is included here as a dimension of its own description, a palpable confusion of the conditions of objectivity with their objects.

Whatever troubles the concepts of death and time might give to the reader of *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, the originality of this approach is not to be underestimated. For this reason, it seems needless to constantly remind the reader of the extent to which arguments are new. Loeb has a tendency to situate his readings in relation to what he sees as the 'scholarly consensus' on Zarathustra interpretation, a phrase which becomes increasingly irksome through over-use. At times this category simply refers to a writer with whom he disagrees. At others he will berate an imaginary body of Nietzsche readers for some ill-advised trend such as the "current practice of ignoring Zarathustra"(211). On Nietzsche's terms, this stance seems at best 'reactive.' The assumption that a 'proper exegesis' of Zarathustra's dreams, visions and allusions is available is also to be questioned (8). Without wanting to cast aspersions on Loeb's knowledge of 'the literature' it is important to make the qualification that he has in his sights a rather select group of Anglo-American commentators. The more general reader, or a reader informed by more 'continental' Nietzsche interpretation, will be bemused by this tendency to make global pronouncements in relation to this particular set. The reader is also likely to be

puzzled by the language adopted by Loeb to advance his interpretation. Whilst it must be acknowledged that Loeb is constantly alert to the ‘performative’ context within which Zarathustra’s words and actions are situated, his approach sees Zarathustra apparently engaged in ‘refutation’ and ‘proof’ in his dialogue with the dwarf in ‘Of the Vision and the Riddle’ (54) and with ‘deduction’ and ‘dialectic’ more generally.

However, lest it be thought that Loeb’s reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is untenable it is important to insist that the difficulty lies not so much with his analysis as with the scale of his ambition. Indeed, one of the most insightful aspects of his reading is his attention to the peculiar shifts of tense throughout Nietzsche’s narrative. As Loeb so skillfully shows, Zarathustra frequently raises questions about the times at which certain events ‘happen,’ often implying that ‘future’ possibilities have already occurred. Loeb’s explanations of how Zarathustra realizes that “he is able to recollect reminders or commands that he gives himself in the future” become increasingly convoluted as do his accounts of how he “can impress reminders or commands in his memory that help to determine his past life to be what it unchangeably is” (10). Rather than regarding these arguments as an extraordinarily tenuous series of claims, reconciled merely by the desire to imprint interpretive closure on Nietzsche’s question-begging narrative, this work must surely be regarded at a meta-level as the most far-reaching attempt yet to take seriously what a life *lived* through the prism of eternal return might be like. Irrespective of Loeb’s hermeneutical intentions, there is something purely schizophrenic about this endeavor. Messages from future selves to younger selves fly through the ether. Dreams are half-remembered, distantly recalled and prophetically realized in this vast dissociative cosmos. If Loeb’s intricate arguments are liable to tax the intellectual stamina of even the hardest reader this is simply because he is staunch in his resolve to offer a coherent perspective on a kaleidoscopic narrative

of bewildering complexity. Few commentators on Nietzsche would be capable of producing this kind of text. Indeed it is hard to see how it could be surpassed.